

The Sleepless Ones

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church on 12th Sunday after Pentecost, August 10, 1986: Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 18: 1-11; Psalm 14; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-19; *Luke 12:32-40*.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this morning comes to us from our Gospel lesson. Jesus says, "Fear not, little flock, for it's God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms."

"Sell your possessions". Preaching on that text I feel like a minister Søren Kierkegaard wrote about. Kierkegaard was a Danish theologian who lived about a hundred years ago. One Sunday morning he went to a prestigious Copenhagen church. The Gospel lesson was read by an extremely rotund minister who waddled to the pulpit and rested his belly comfortably on it. He folded his hands over his round tummy and announced his text, "Jesus said, 'If any one comes after me he must deny himself.'" Kierkegaard was so struck by the irony of this man, who'd obviously not been denying himself, preaching on a text calling for self-denial. The incongruity of it was so great that Kierkegaard got up and walked out of the church.

I feel a little bit like that pastor but I hope you don't walk out. There's such a great incongruity between my own life-style and what Jesus is calling for in the text. Kay and I are so grateful for all that we have since we've come here to Oxford. I get up in the morning and look out over my estate with the beautiful fruit trees and grass and lake and hills and I thank God for all we have. We have so much. We have two cars, a camper, two lawn mowers (one to ride and one to push). We have a beautiful home, beautiful furniture and more books than I'll probably ever get around to reading. And my text for this morning's sermon is, "Sell all your

our text.

*What's the secret of such carefree living? First, many of us cling to our possessions instead of sharing them because we're worried about our future. But isn't that kind of attitude very close to unbelief? If we really believe that God is who Jesus said he is, then we can begin to live without anxiety for the future. Jesus taught us that God is our loving Father who's given us his kingdom with all its immense resources. Jesus called God, *Abba*, the intimate Aramaic word for *daddy*. As our faith increases in the almighty creator who is our loving father, our anxiety about the future automatically decreases.*

Second, the secret of a carefree attitude towards our money and possessions is an unconditional faith in Jesus as Lord. Our epistle lesson tells us what real faith does. It leaves all like Abraham and Sarah to go out looking for a kingdom whose builder and maker is God. It means trusting God's promises rather than placing our security in our possessions. It means genuinely wanting to seek first the kingdom of heaven. I don't mean seeking pie in the sky by and by. I mean seeking first that kingdom which is so unlike the kingdoms and nations of this world; that kingdom where the poor, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the peacemakers and those who mourn are blessed.

If Jesus is truly Lord and if we trust in a loving heavenly Father who's given us a kingdom, then we can live without anxiety about possessions, even though we don't see that kingdom very clearly as yet.

But does Jesus literally mean that we're to sell all our possessions? What good will it do if all Christians become poor? Won't we become a burden to society and end up on a government dole?

possessions."

I confess that I can't read these words without an underlying sense of uneasiness. But there's also a strange appeal. I think of St. Anthony of Egypt who one Sunday walked into his parish church and heard the Gospel lesson being read, "Go sell all your possessions and give to the poor." Anthony felt God was speaking directly to him. He left the church, made provisions for his sister who was his only relative, sold his many possessions and gave everything to the poor. At the end of a time of study and solitude he came filled with the Holy Spirit to his people to call men and women to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior.

I think also of St Francis of Assissi. As a young man he lived an aimless life. But one day while riding his horse he saw a horribly mishapen leper. His first reaction was to ignore him. But something strangely drew him to this poor wretch. He felt compassion for him, perhaps the first time in his life he had ever felt genuine compassion. He stopped his horse, dismounted, approached the man, and with tears in his eyes embraced and kissed him. He didn't know what had come over him. He then remounted his horse and rode away. When he turned to take one last look, the leper had disappeared. He must have been Jesus. Soon after that Francis dedicated himself completely to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He went home, sold all his possessions and spent the rest of his life joyfully preaching the word of God. He had a completely carefree attitude toward possessions.

There's something appealing and attractive about these two men with their care-free attitude towards possessions. But I'm neither St Anthony or St Francis. I have to confess that, in spite of continuing struggle and effort, I haven't attained that kind of carefree attitude Jesus speaks of in

Some people believe that's what happened to the early church in Jerusalem. In Acts we read how they sold their possessions and gave to the poor. They held all things in common. It was an experiment in Christian communism. But in Paul's letters written a few years later he's asking Christians in Rome and Philippi and Thessalonica to take up an offering for the poor in Jerusalem. Some people think the church was poor because they'd sold all their possessions.

And when we study the NT we discover that Jesus assumed the legitimacy of private property. Simon Peter owned a house that Jesus stayed in. Jesus commanded his followers to give to the poor and loan money even when there was no reasonable hope of repayment. That kind of advice doesn't make sense if Jesus hadn't assumed that the possession of property and money was legitimate. *But the right of private property isn't absolute.* The Bible insists that God alone has an absolute right to property. We're not owners, we're stewards of what belongs to God. My house, my cars, my garden, my money isn't mine. It belongs to God.

If the words of Jesus don't necessarily have to be taken literally, *how*, then, do we obey? We don't want to become reckless fanatics who literally sell everything only to become a burden on others. Yet neither do we want to water down what Jesus says to the place where our attitude towards possessions is no different than the average secular person. To use the imagery of Jeremiah in our OT lesson, how can we become as a church and as individual Christians like clay in the hands of God, letting God shape us into the vessel he wants?

First, let's get in touch with our feelings about money. Most of us have fear, insecurity, and guilt about money. We're afraid we have too little and want more, but we're also afraid that we have too much.

Sometimes we're afraid that others will think we're poor. Sometimes we're afraid that people will overestimated how much we have and think we're greedy.

Second, let's stop denying our wealth. I remember as a child thinking I was poor. When I grew up I realised that my father made good money as a railroad engineer. But he started out extremely poor. He used to be poor and he never got out of the habit of thinking of himself as poor. He *felt* poor and he *talked* poor even though we owned a house and always had plenty to eat. *A lot of us are that way.* We think we're poor when in reality we're rich. Let's get away from our dishonesty and frankly admit our wealth. And let's not feel guilty about our wealth. We're rich. We're privileged. We don't have to worry so much about our possessions.

Thirdly, let's seek out people who'll struggle with us through the money maze. I was once a part of a small group that covenanted to meet regularly in order to find ways to simplify our lifestyles. We need the support of a community of faith that will stand with us in our struggle and affirm us in life-style change.

Fourthly, let's find ways to get in touch with the poor. Inevitably when I've preached a sermon like this a transient comes to me a few days later asking for money. After years of experience I never give money. I think simply giving money can be a cop out. Often the real need is not money which will be squandered or wasted on alcohol but help in living on a budget, help in finding a job, some food that will tide them over until the next check.

But we don't have to wait for the poor to come to us. We can make a conscious choice to live among the poor. When Kay was in college she took a course which required her to live in a Philadelphia slum for a month. She

stayed with a preacher's family and ate what the urban poor ate. She went to a poor store-front church. She experienced the fear of the urban poor as she listening to gang fights outside her window. That experience will be with her forever influencing her attitudes about the poor. Some of you have skills and the time to be a volunteer in mission and live among the poor. You could go to an Indian reservation, an urban ghetto, a South American village for a month or a year sharing your skills as a carpenter, a farmer, a business-person and learning what it's like to be really poor.

Fifth, let's experience the meaning of inner renunciation.

Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. I can well imagine that by the time he came down from the mountain, the words *my* and *mine* had forever changed their meaning for him. He discovered that everything he had, including his children, belonged to God. Maybe it would be a good idea to stamp everything we own with the reminder, "Given by God, owned by God, and to be used for the purposes of Christ's kingdom".

Finally, let's give with glad and generous hearts. Even the poorest among us need to know that they can give. Just the very act of letting go of money or some possession does something within us to strengthen our faith in God and helps to destroy the demon greed. *For myself, I've tried to make it a part of my lifestyle to tithe.* This isn't a legalistic thing. It's not something I think everybody is required legalistically to do. It doesn't necessarily make a person more Christlike. But for me its a concrete act of faith. Whenever I get paid I make it a habit to write out the first check to the church to carry out the work of the kingdom.

Jesus said, "Sell your possessions and give to the poor." So often money becomes very much like a god. Money and possessions give us

security, status, and power. But Jesus tells us all these things rest with God who's given us a kingdom. Unfortunately, we can't see that kingdom as clearly as we can see our money and possessions. That's what makes them so seductive. We so easily become hooked on possessions and get our eyes off the real purpose for our living, to seek God's kingdom and righteousness for all people. Money and possessions become a consuming, life-dominating problem. It's a god demanding an all-inclusive allegiance. But our future and status and power are secure not because of our possessions but because we're in the hands of a loving, omnipotent Father. If we truly trust in him and are unconditionally submitted to his lordship, we can begin to imitate Jesus' carefree unconcern for property and possessions.

Amen

Let us pray:

Take my life and let it be
 Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
 Take my hands and let them move
 At the impulse of Thy love.

Take my lips and let them be
 Filled with messages for Thee;
 Take my silver and my gold,
 Not a mite would I withhold.

Take my love, my God, I pour
 At Thy feet its treasure store;
 Take myself and I will be
 Ever, only, all for Thee,
 Ever, only, all for thee. Amen.